

Symbolism - Symbolism And Music

Many symbolists share the notion that all art should aspire to the condition of music, which was thought to be the most emotionally direct aesthetic medium. In "Art poétique" (1884), Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) famously instructed poets on the importance of "music before all else." This musicality was achieved in much symbolist poetry through rhyming, alliteration, assonance, and other rhetorical flourishes.

Mallarmé's famous late poem *Un coup de dés* (1897; A dice-throw) takes the relationship between poetry and music even further than Verlaine. In this poem, Mallarmé radically experimented with type size and placement, leaving many blank areas, which themselves seem to carry meaning. The poem has been compared to a musical score with blanks that prescribe rests and with phrases that evanesce in much the same way as the music of Mallarmé's contemporary, the composer Claude Debussy. Indeed, Mallarmé's conception of his poems as a kind of music is brought out in an anecdote. When Debussy asked permission to set Mallarmé's "Afternoon of a Faun" (1876) to music, Mallarmé responded: "But I thought I had already done that!" (Sieburth, in Hollier, p. 796).

No composer is more closely aligned with symbolism than Claude Debussy (1862–1918). Debussy is famous for setting many symbolist writings to music, including several poems by Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Most famously, he wrote "Prelude to the Afternoon of the Faun," meant to complement and extend Mallarmé's poem. Perhaps more important, Debussy approached musical composition with aims parallel to those of many symbolists. As Debussy wrote in an article of *La revue blanche* in 1902, music should not be "confined to producing Nature more or less exactly, but rather to producing the mysterious correspondences which link Nature with Imagination" (quoted in Lloyd, p. 266).

Like the symbolists, Debussy experimented radically with the conventions of rhythm, abandoning artificial demarcations within musical time in a move analogous to the symbolists' rejection of the classic meters of poetry. Debussy compared his desire to minimize symbol and ornament in music to Mallarmé's carefully wrought economy of language. Debussy also rejected any notion that music should tell an easily decipherable narrative: "There are those who want music to tell base anecdotes! As if the newspapers didn't perform this task wonderfully well already" (quoted in Lloyd, p. 263). Both Debussy and Mallarmé imagined that their work, because of its rejection of anecdotal references and formulas, required active participation by its audience and asked them to transcend the mundanity of everyday experience. Debussy emphasized not only sound but silence as an element of meaning in his music, and this has been described as analogous to Mallarmé's emphasis on the pauses and blank areas of the page in his late poem "Dice Thrown." Finally, both Debussy and Mallarmé composed works that circle around the theme of desire.

Many poets associated with symbolism were extremely interested in the German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883). The French interest in Wagner went back to the 1860s, when Baudelaire had admired and written about him and Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Judith Gautier, and Catulle Mendès had all visited him. Wagner imagined his music-dramas as *Gesamtkunstwerke* (total works of art) in which all the arts would be combined in a single work to transcend the possibilities of individual media. While some critics emphasized the naturalist tendencies of Wagner's music, French interpreters of Wagner imagined the orchestrator of the total work of art as a secular priest and the work itself as a means to provide a transcendent experience. Baudelaire described his experience of Wagner's music-drama *Lohengrin* (1848) as ecstatic, instigating an involuntary dreamlike state. Furthermore, in a transformation of Wagner that would be seized on by the symbolists, Baudelaire relates this experience to the synesthetic ideal he had described in "Correspondences," saying that music by its very nature suggests synaesthetic analogies. In the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the

performance of Wagner's operas had been banned in France. Many French literary figures, however, visited the festivals at Bayreuth, and by the mid-1880s there was a veritable cult of Wagner in France. From 1885 to 1888 one of Mallarmé's disciples, Édouard Dujardin, published a symbolist journal, *La revue wagnérienne*, devoted to Wagnerism.



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